



**Seeing Triple:** This untitled triptych from 1989 is part of the Oliver Jackson show at the Triton Museum.

# Gestural Giant

*A conversation with artist Oliver Jackson* **By David M. Roth**

NAN ERA where painting has (wrongly) been declared all but dead, Oliver Jackson's gestural abstract works bear elegant testimony to the power of the artist's hand. Call his method old-fashioned if you like. Jackson's more than willing to watch deconstructionists divert mass media to their own ends.

For his part, though, Jackson prefers to wrestle with paint and canvas—and the problems of two-dimensional representation—to get at matters of spiritual import. The results can be seen at the



M. Lee Fathene

*Oliver Jackson*

San Jose Museum of Art, where Jackson is one of the participants in *Twelve Bay Area Painters: The Eureka Fellowship Winner's* show (see sidebar review) and at the Triton Museum of Art, which is currently featuring a show of his new pieces. Ballet fans also had a chance this month to see Jackson's designs for the San Jose Cleveland Ballet's production of *Mysteries and Raptures*.

A native of St. Louis (now living in Oakland), Jackson spent his formative years as a member of St. Louis' Black Artists Group, a grass-roots organization whose boundary-stretching members included jazz musicians Julius Hemphill and Oliver Lake. His early association with this group of artists helped him develop a multifaceted aesthetic.



Jackson chose not to work in the traditional narrative style of Midwest regionalists, nor to explore abstraction's move into minimalism, as was

common in the '60s. Instead, he defined a muscular style that fuses the grace of Renaissance masters, the loopy figurative abstraction of Philip Guston and the frenetic gesturalism of '50s abstract expressionism. What makes Jackson's canvases unique,

however, is not merely his synthesis of influences, but a singular compositional balance that's only rarely upset by his sheer energy.

In 1971, Jackson moved to Sacramento to take a teaching position at California State University, and upon doing so, his work came to be associated with Bay Area figurative painters such as Richard Diebenkorn, Nathan Oliveira and Joan Brown. Having grown up outside that tradition, however, Jackson can't be accurately pegged in that category.

Since 1982, the year he landed a one-man show at the Seattle Museum and found himself, the following year, included in the Whitney Biennial, Jackson has ranked among Northern California's foremost painters.

When we met at his Oakland studio, he'd just completed preparing for his two exhibits in the

Santa Clara Valley. What follows are excerpts from a wide-ranging conversation:

**Metro:** *How was it that you became an artist?*

**Jackson:** When I was small, I was always making things. And when you are making things that are nonutilitarian, they call that art. I was just a kid. Making things was just something I did. I didn't question it. And I knew that I wanted to be to making in the way that a child knows. But that was not a commitment to making in the way that I do now.

**M:** *What happened after high school?*

**OJ:** I was very unclear about how to proceed, and after working for about a year in various jobs, I took a chance in going to a Wesleyan University and immediately went right to the art department. Once I was there, it opened up. The resources: printmaking, painting, sculpture and being in a serious milieu for making things. It was a time of trying to absorb as much information and technique as I could.

**M:** *When you came out of that program what did your work look like?*

**OJ:** It was basically figurative.

**M:** *Were you at all involved in abstract expressionism?*

**OJ:** No, but I was very aware of it. As a matter of fact I was an opponent of it at the time. I didn't understand it. It was very hot. I was looking at it very closely, but I didn't understand what they were doing compositionally.

**M:** *When did you begin to understand it?*

**OJ:** When I understood that the compositional

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**Oliver Jackson** shows his works at a one-man show at the Triton Museum of Art, 1505 Warburton Ave., Santa Clara, through Nov. 30, and as part of *Twelve Bay Area Painters: The Eureka Fellowship Winners* at the San Jose Museum of Art, 110 S. Market St., San Jose, through Jan. 16.

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basis for so-called abstract expressionism was as sound as the compositional basis for Renaissance paintings, and that the structural basis simply left out what had become standard devices. They were using other devices that were just as sound, and that there was nothing frivolous going on.

**M:** *People have remarked that you've been greatly influenced by music, jazz in particular.*

**OJ:** I have some problems with that now. I should have never mentioned that—particularly jazz, because it's something that gets thrown at you. I'm really clear on what I mean, but I was much too casual in mentioning that. Let me say, yes. It influenced me in ways that allowed me to approach the visual language with more clarity. I don't think that music as an audio language and the visual language are exchangeable; they're distinct languages, but they have some things that are common.

In other words, in a painting we have to take into account, literally, the two-dimensional space. And I'm not talking about flatness now. You have to know how to make its presence underlie the work. And musicians—it was clear how they approached the space, the space that's not yet made into music, the way they open the space, how they take the space. It's fundamental to the piece.

**M:** *What parts of African art or culture show up in your work that are distinct from the western modernist tradition?*

**OJ:** The thing African art opened for me was knowing that any set of material or compositional relationships can work if you can find the interior harmonies that allow that relationship to be absolutely comfortable in a given place. And that shows up really strong and clear in African art.

**M:** *For example?*

**OJ:** Putting together pitch and tar and gold. It's just not the kind of thing that's been codified in the west. It was done in the medieval period, but not now. In African art, the piece dictates, on its own terms, how it engages the viewer; therefore there are extraordinary means presented that bring conjunctions of things together that not only feed the aesthetics but jump right past them.

**M:** *You have spoken a lot about painting having the ability to allow the viewer to get beyond the object; the painting being the vehicle, not the point.*

**OJ:** If you're a maker, you're driven to make something that can't be explained very well—by you. After it's made, then it speaks the voice of a thing, and that is everything. The thing is going to do one kind of work, but it must be doing something that is not speakable and only understood in terms of ambiguity. Ambiguity is one of the great strengths of the visual language. Ambiguity in the verbal language is very tricky, except for poets; but it's our bread and butter.

**M:** *Do you consider the Bay Area figurative painting and abstract expressionist traditions as the most vital influences on your work?*

**OJ:** The truth is, I don't think about it. People put that on me. That's been written about me. I don't think of them as vital or not vital. It doesn't matter. It's all talk. I was called an abstract expressionist painter, and there were figures in the paintings all the time. They preferred not to see them.

Then the neoexpressionists come and go, and [the critics] saw figures. I'm not from the Bay Area; I've always done figures. You do figures out here, you use colors that are bright, and they say Bay Area. I was never a part of that tradition. People relate to you in relation to what they're comfortable with. I can't validate anything but what I'm doing. ■